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SUBJECT: Deputy Secretary Lew's February 26, 2009
Meeting with Colombian Defense Minister Santos

1. (U) February 26, 2009; 1:15 p.m.,
Washington, D.C.

2. (U) Participants:

U.S.
Deputy Secretary Lew
INL A/S David T. Johnson
WHA PDAS Craig Kelly
Craig Lang (INL notetaker)

Colombia
Defense Minister Santos
Ambassador Carolina Barco
Silvia Constain (Deputy Chief of Mission)
Juan Carolos Mira (Chief of Staff for Minister Santos)
Julian Ponton (Assistant to Minister Santos)

3. (SBU) SUMMARY. Colombian Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos expressed Colombia's gratitude for U.S. support of Plan Colombia, and told Deputy Secretary Lew that with continued U.S. assistance, Colombia can complete the final phase of its campaign against terrorism and narco-traffickers. Deputy Secretary Lew noted the importance of U.S./Colombia relations, and pledged a strong commitment to helping Colombia move forward. Both sides agreed to discuss ways to continue nationalization of counternarcotics programs, including aerial eradication. Noting the good cooperation his country has with Mexico and others on counter-drug and rule of law issues, Minister Santos raised the idea of establishing a regional training center in Colombia. END SUMMARY

The Final Push for Success

4. (SBU) According to Colombian Defense Minister Santos, Colombia has reached the final phase of its campaign against drug traffickers and terrorists. The progress made under Plan Colombia has culminated in Colombia's "Strategic Leap", which is the Government of Colombia's (GOC) integration of military, police and social assistance in the nation's most difficult and sensitive areas. The GOC has already begun implementing the "Strategic Leap" in a pilot project in the department of Meta that has helped dramatically reduce the replanting of coca in this region.

5. (SBU) In reference to the U.S. Congress' redistribution and reduction of counternarcotics and security assistance to Colombia, Santos noted that these cuts are hurting the GOC, particularly in light of their own financial limitations. Santos argued an increase in U.S. aid may be warranted to help Colombia successfully accomplish its goals. Deputy Secretary Lew acknowledged the Congressional shift and pledged a continued, strong U.S. commitment to Colombia.

6. (SBU) Based upon her extensive outreach with Congress, Colombian Ambassador Barco highlighted two observations that concern her regarding others' perception of Plan Colombia. The Ambassador felt that the push to support social programs at the expense of security operations was a false divide. She noted that without security, social assistance would be difficult to implement. Additionally,

Ambassador Barco acknowledged the positive role of aerial spraying within a comprehensive security package.

Nationalization and Colombia's Regional Role

17. (SBU) Deputy Secretary Lew expressed our desire to continue nationalizing counternarcotics programs with the GOC. Minister Santos committed to sharing some ideas with the U.S. on nationalization, particularly related to the Colombian National Police Eradication program. Ambassador Barco highlighted the visit of the U.S. Nationalization Team to Bogota the week of March 2 as a vehicle to advance this dialogue.

18. (SBU) Turning to the impact drugs and crime have had on Latin America, Minister Santos noted Colombia's good relationship with Mexico and others. Santos expressed a willingness to explore the idea of opening a regional training center in Colombia to help combat these issues. Deputy Secretary Lew welcomed a continuing dialogue with Colombia on these and other issues, and expressed a desire to visit the country soon.

CLINTON